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Story Behind the Story

I've always been fascinated with ruins and fallen civilizations, and I also have a fascination with vertical cities. This story serves up all of those with a helping of myth and exobiology. For those who find themselves interested in this world, other stories in the same universe include "First Do No Harm" (*Strange Horizons*), "The Starsmith" (*Escape Pod*), and "Iya-Iya" (*Kaleidotrope*), all available online.

The Stranger in the Tower

...Jonathan Edelstein

Forty meters above where Madalitso and Nyuma stood, a tangle of girders and pipes barred the way to the upper stories.

Madalitso scanned them closely through his eyepiece, looking for passages. He had been in this place before—Nyuma had taken him here on the first day of his fostering, and he'd returned at intervals during his training—but he'd never before had to find the way onward. "The roads shift," Nyuma had told him, "and on every journey, we must find them again." He had learned those roads, but still he searched for changes in the known places and new paths through the unknown.

It seemed impossible. Some girders hung loosely, with only the support of other beams keeping them from falling; pipes and bars were twisted as if by the hand of a god. There hardly seemed room enough between for the water that fell from them in a steady drip, let alone two men. But as Madalitso looked closer, he saw openings and crawlspaces, and his eyepiece told him that the ways beyond were still open. They had shifted as he'd been told, but not so much that he'd have to find new ones.

"*Mwishi*," said Nyuma, and Madalitso's eyes returned from the upper world to the lower: to the staircase on which they stood, to the platform from which it projected, to the floors and open rooms and fallen girders below, to the marred

and blasted outer wall. A great hole, wider at the top and fringed with creeping vines, stretched across an entire side of the cavern, and another one almost as large stood opposite. A warship had made those openings, and Madalitso could scarcely imagine a weapon that could do that to ceramic and nanosteel, but what was even more unimaginable was that it hadn't been a killing blow. The Union had fallen almost sixteen hundred years ago, but its towers still stood.

"*Mwishi*," Nyuma repeated. "Have you seen the path?"

"Yes, *shikulu*."

"Are you ready?"

"Yes, *shikulu*." Madalitso's voice was firm but not without some apprehension: this was an initiation, the completion of his training year, but it was also a test.

"Then lead us." Nyuma put his hand on the youth's shoulder and waited.

Madalitso stood where he was for a moment, feeling the comforting pressure of Nyuma's touch, and then took three steps upward to where the stairway suddenly ended. It swayed in the breeze, and Madalitso kept one hand on the rusted railing while he took his harpoon gun in the other.

He sighted and began to squeeze the trigger, but hesitated at the last second. This was the act that would seal him to the *ilundo wa bawela*, the guild of climbers, and the fear of failing flashed through him on a level below the conscious. He felt a flush of remembered shame at the times he'd disappointed Nyuma during his fostering, and his hands shook with the fear of doing so again. He breathed deeply, and this time the calm remained as he exhaled; he sighted again and fired.

For an instant, it seemed that the grappling hook might fall short after all, but then it caught on the beam where Madalitso had aimed. He tested it with his weight and then swung out, over the floor of the cavern and the many stories beneath. He felt Nyuma's weight on the cable below him and began ratcheting himself upward; he was a *muwela* now, and the road was open.



On the other side were forests and rivers.

There were tablelands above the tangle of pipes, floors that were almost intact and others that hung like islands among the support beams. The walls were open to the generous rains, and the waters pooled and flowed, cascading down stairways, falling from the edges of the islands and forming ponds where the flooring sagged. There were shrubs and high grasses which rustled with the passage of cane-rats, and toward the edge, Madalitso could see small trees and flowers reaching for the sun on high stalks. Beyond them, outside the walls, the sun gleamed off other towers and the city sprawled half a kilometre below, but its noises seemed distant amid the kingfishers' calls.

These were paths Madalitso didn't know, and he watched in silent wonder as his fosterer led, looking down on landscapes from the air-islands and

seeing them disappear below the next full floor. There were levels beyond counting, connected by stairs from ancient days or ladders that the *bawela* of the past had left for them, and on every one, there was something new. “There are plants that grow only here,” Nyuma said. “My *shikulu* showed me at least fifty. Even more microorganisms, and with those, there are new ones every generation.”

That, Madalitso knew. That was the reason the *ilundo wa bawela* existed at all. There was life here from which apothecaries could make medicine or industrialists fuel and plastic; there was a yeast from which brewers made beer that was the envy of a thousand worlds. There was profit to be made from harvesting what grew here, and even more to be gained from discovering and assaying life forms yet unknown. But knowing this was different from seeing it.

Later, as they forded one stairway, they found they were sharing it with iridescent red fish – fish whose tail and flippers were more muscular than others of their kind, and which leaped upward from step to step as the waters flowed down. Above, the fish had made a nest of grasses and mud that channelled the flow into a pool, and Madalitso’s eyes were wide as he saw one of them wallowing outside the water and pushing mud into its walls. Nyuma reached down and caught it expertly. “Good eating,” he said. “They can leave the water for a few minutes, but when they do, it’s easy to catch ’em.”

“Do *they* live only here?”

“No, you see them up in the mountains sometimes. There hasn’t nearly been time for new animals to evolve. But damned if I know how they *got* here.”

Madalitso climbed on, dreaming.

As night fell, they reached a level that he could see had once held fields. The crops had gone feral, but the remnants of orderly rows remained. Near a small pool was a fire-pit that generations of *bawela* had used, and Nyuma made camp there while Madalitso built the fire.

“Here,” Nyuma said, reaching up to a nearby branch and pulling off a handful of berries. “These grow in the highlands. When my grandfather was a child, we could make money selling *them* in the market. In those days there were always people up here cultivating them—there were many more *bawela* than there are now. We can cook the fish with them, but they’re good by themselves.”

Madalitso ate the berries and red juice dripped down his chin. “Did they bring them from the highlands? To grow here?”

Nyuma shook his head. “No, this isn’t like the cinchona. The birds brought this, hundreds of years ago.” Some of those birds were still calling, their forms shadowed in the dancing flames.

“Sing of them,” Nyuma said suddenly. “You are a *muwela* now, but you can’t forget your training. Give me the *Inimbo wa Ilowa*.”

Madalitso needed no prompting. He’d learned the Song of the Soil in the very first days of his fostering, and like any member of the guild, he could recite

it even in his dreams. "In the bright day when the builders raised towers, long ere the darkness that fell with war's hours..."

"Not that part," said Nyuma. "What came after." So Madalitso sang of the rebirth: how the ancestors' furnishings had decayed into soil as they'd been designed to do, how birds and bats roosted in the skeletons of towers and fertilised them with their guano, how the winds and flying creatures brought seeds and how animals found their way from below. Sung here, the words took on the quality of myth, of holy chant.

At last the song wound toward its conclusion. "And as darkness lifted, the brave people followed, to harvest the fields that the ancestors hollowed..."

"That was a thousand years ago," Nyuma said. "And still we follow."

"The *bawela* have been coming all that time?"

"Not only us. There were pilgrims once. This is a *chipembwe*, a place where our ancestors died. They usually went higher to leave their offerings, but sometimes you'll find them."

Madalitso nodded. Even now, long after the pilgrimages had ceased, people still traced their families to those who had lived in the towers, and they still gave the *bawela* offerings to carry. His own backpack contained tokens—locks of hair, polished stones, coins, small lumps of silver—that people had paid him a few *indalama* to leave in the high places. This was a *chitimbo* too, an ancestral burial place, as well as a *chipembwe*. The people in the towers sixteen hundred years before had gone to rest where they fell, and all of them were part of the soil now.

He murmured a few words of a praise-song, but before he could finish, he was asleep.



In the morning, they climbed higher, to the floors where cinchona grew. Once, Madalitso knew, quinine bark alone had been enough to make the *bawela* wealthy, and there were remnants of huts they had built to keep out the cold winds. But when he looked out into the day, he saw why that was no longer so. The city, now thirteen hundred meters below, sprawled for miles along the coastline, and as Madalitso watched, a train emerged and began its journey to the highlands. The railroads had been back for sixty years, and it was cheaper now to bring cinchona from the mountains than to cultivate it in the towers.

He felt Nyuma's hand on his shoulder again. "But there is still work for us, *mwishi*," the older man said. "There is always work for us."

Soon, that work began. The levels above the cinchona fields were colder and the air was thinning, and the plants there were different from what grew immediately above the cavern. Troops of small golden apes swung from branches to girders to poles, and hooted at the *bawela* as they passed. There were still signs of campfires and old huts, but there had plainly never been fields, and Nyuma sorted through the wild growth looking for treasure.

“Do you recognise this?” he asked, moving a shrub aside to reveal a tufted sprig beneath. Madalitso did. It was cotton-grass, valued not so much for itself as for the symbiotic bacteria that could be harvested from it, and he’d been shown it in training.

“Assay it, then.”

Madalitso reached into his pack for the assay kit he had carefully sterilised before the journey, and cut a small sample from one of the tufts. He put it into a tube of buffering solution, labelled it, and examined it with eyepiece and filtered light.

What he saw dismayed him. “The bacteria count is very low,” he said. “I don’t think we’ll be able to sell this.”

“Are you sure?” Nyuma repeated the test himself, and Madalitso flushed with the shame of being doubted, but then the older man shook his head in turn. He looked unhappy but not surprised. “Something’s been blighting them the past few years—it happened before, in my *shikulu’s* time. I’ve gotten better counts further in toward the core, but the cotton-grass doesn’t grow so well there.”

At the level where they were standing, the floors had collapsed well outside the centre of the tower. They climbed higher and crossed a rope bridge to an air-island that extended further in. At these levels, the tower had a central core that was walled off from the living and working spaces without; the *bawela* had never breached it, and there were dreadful stories of what had happened to those who ventured inside, but they didn’t fear to come close. There were a few tufts of cotton-grass there, and as Nyuma had predicted, the bacteria count was higher, but the harvest was still a poor one. So it was, also, with the other plants for which they prospected: there had been drought recently, and though the rains this year were plentiful, the fragile life of the upper stories hadn’t fully recovered.

That night, with the mountain apes’ hooting calls in the distance, they made camp at twenty-two hundred meters, near the remains of another ancient foundation. “A hunters’ camp,” Nyuma guessed, but Madalitso could see he wasn’t sure.

“Could they have been *tupondo*?”

“If you believe the stories,” Nyuma said. “There’s certainly room in the towers for outlaws to hide. I’ve never seen a *kapondo* here, though, and the stories always put them higher. We’re only halfway up.”

“Maybe they lived here before the *bawela* and the pilgrims, and fled higher when we came.”

“They’d have had to be desperate to come here then, and I doubt their camps would still be here after that long. But there are stories; they say whole tribes lived here once.”

For a moment, Madalitso imagined what it might have been like to be a tribesman here, in the deepest days of the dark age when the people below were little more than tribesmen themselves. What must it have been like to look down on the city lights, see them growing generation by generation and

remember that the towers had once been cities in themselves? What would the first *bawela* have made of such tribes—would they have thought them indigenous to the towers? But any such tribes had long since melted into the lowland population and disappeared into the guild's legends.

"Maybe you can meet them tomorrow or the day after," Nyuma said. "We're going to climb higher."

"How high?" asked Madalitso. The *bawela* sometimes climbed to three thousand meters, but rarely went higher the air was already sparse and cold, and even though he'd spent three months of his fostering in the mountains, his breath was starting to come short.

"To the top, if we have to. Higher than the trains go, higher than the mountain men. We can look for new life, things they never bring back. But maybe we won't have to go quite that high, if the harvests just above are good."

But they weren't. They ventured outside the skin of the tower to the tattered stumps of the glass-walled High Streets and High Gardens, but found little they could sell below. The violet-creeper hung from the frames, brought from a far world eight hundred years ago and containing a drug that strengthened the heart, but the doctors had better remedies now. They searched for false-ivy at twenty-five hundred meters and *mwata's*-garlands at three thousand. They found some, and assayed a promising microbe that the *awamulaye* might want to test for medicine, but not enough to make the journey worthwhile.

They climbed higher, into a world that Madalitso had never seen even in the mountains. It was cold, and he wrapped his coat tightly around himself, but it was lush and wet, and the air-islands were covered with boreal jungle and muskeg. There were mosses here of a kind that even Nyuma had never seen, and odd-looking wildflowers. The two *bawela* sampled them under the gaze of terns and eagles, but could not be certain of their value.

"If we want to be sure," Nyuma said, "we must go higher." And so they climbed.



In the morning, when Madalitso searched the jungle floor, he found a coin, about the size of a sixteen-*ndalama* piece but so worn with age that its design and inscriptions were unreadable.

"An offering," Nyuma said when he held it up.

"Who left it?" asked Madalitso. Their own offerings had been left far below. "The other *bawela* don't come here. They climb other towers; only we work this one."

"Many people have worked this tower before us, *mwishi*. They didn't have assay kits as good as ours, but some of them may have climbed high during lean years. Or maybe pilgrims came this far. But it is an offering. Leave it alone."

Madalitso found two more coins that day, and another offering as well, a small chain of beads such as a market-woman might sell in the city. He found an

arrowhead as well, half-hidden in the swampy undergrowth, and that puzzled him even more.

But it was Nyuma who found the most uncanny thing of all. It was a bell, made of Union metal that had defied tarnish and decay, and inlaid with a milky semi-stone that was equally indestructible. There were words etched along its edge, and though Madalitso could read them easily enough, he understood only a few of them: the language in which they were written was sixteen hundred years old.

Madalitso had seen other things from the days of the Union. Its artifacts were sold as curiosities, and even now, the mechanics' guild maintained its surviving machines. But to see one here...

"The towers were picked clean of artifacts centuries ago," he said.

"Not this high, it seems," answered Nyuma. "This one is fine work—we'll sell it below. Maybe there will be more."

Madalitso's eyes widened, just as any market-woman's would, as he calculated the price the bell might bring. But as he looked at the ground where Nyuma had found it, his caution returned. "The stones there look like they might have been arranged," he said. "Maybe there really are people up here—maybe this is a place for offerings or rituals. Should we leave it like the other offerings?"

"This isn't an offering, *mwishi*. Have you seen huts or campfires up here? The bell has been waiting sixteen hundred years for us to find it."

Madalitso might have argued further, but Nyuma's brusque voice—the one that had rebuked him many times when he'd made mistakes in training—left the protest stillborn.

They climbed higher. Here, above four thousand meters, the jungle had thinned. There were still a few shrubs, but the tangle of growth had given way to a grassy tundra fragrant with cow-parsnips and wildflowers. Small animals scurried under the grasses and more apes climbed the moist vines that connected the intact floors and the air-islands, but the apes here had thicker hair and fled at the *bawela*'s approach. Nearly everything here was unfamiliar, and Madalitso and Nyuma assayed plants and catalogued microbes, but it was the possibility of more artifacts that fired their imagination.

That evening they camped just a hundred meters below the tower's roof. They were high enough now to look down on the snow-capped tops of the city's other towers and the scattered clouds beneath them. There were lights above the clouds as the day faded. The two *bawela* were facing the part of the city where the landing-field and harbor district were, and the *fikondo wa intanda*, the starships, descended to Chambishi Port with their cargoes.

Madalitso held the Union bell in his hands, moving it from side to side so that it chimed softly. "Do you think this came on the ships?" Madalitso asked. "From another world?"

"*Malupili ishika*," answered Nyuma – "the mountains will know." Madalitso smiled: that was a saying he'd heard many times from his mother. The world had memory even when mere humans forgot.

"If it came through the *ichiyawafu*, the dead will remember."

"If you believe the stories," Nyuma said. From his tone, he clearly didn't, but Madalitso wasn't certain. The *ichiyawafu* was the non-space which made it possible for ships to go from world to world in less than lifetimes, but the most ancient myths gave that name to the country of the dead, and sailors sometimes dreamed of their ancestors when they passed through it. Here in the skeleton of a tower, the ghost of a long-dead city, that land seemed very close.

"I think the dead are still with us," Madalitso said.

Just then, the first dart hissed passed them in the night.



Another dart followed, and another. Then two more all at once. Madalitso, paralysed with shock, looked up to an air-island ten meters above and saw a face, dark as his but unaccountably ruddy, and a hand holding a blowgun. Then the face disappeared, and he felt Nyuma's hand pulling his arm urgently.

"Down!" the older man said. "Get down!" Madalitso threw himself flat and rolled behind the hummock of earth where they'd built their campfire, hoping it would give him cover.

More darts hissed overhead, from both the air-island and the level where they were, and then there was the twang of bowstrings and the flight of arrows. Madalitso drew the pistol from his belt and pointed it at where the missiles were coming from, but Nyuma pushed his hand down. "It's too dark to hit anything," he said. "Don't waste your bullets."

Arrows flew over their temporary shelter and out into the clouded night. Madalitso wondered whether the attackers were outlaws or simply tribesmen who thought him a trespasser, and realised that it hardly mattered. He heard voices in the middle distance. They were calling in a language he barely recognised, but one of the words sounded like "bell," and the word for "attack" was unmistakable.

"We have to go," Nyuma said. "We're too exposed here, and there are too many of them. When they rush us, they'll push us right off the edge."

"Go where?"

Nyuma didn't answer in words. He rolled to where their packs were and, took one, and hung it in front of him as a shield. In the same movement, he seized a brand from the fire, rose to his knees, and threw it at the air-island. Madalitso followed, braving the arrow-storm and throwing another brand at where he'd heard the voices. The bell was still in his hand, and for a second he forgot what it was; then he cast it aside. It wasn't theirs.

If Nyuma saw, he gave no sign. "Now use your pistol!" he said. "And run!"

Madalitso expected that he would be shot down as soon as he rose, but somehow he wasn't. He and Nyuma ran, firing at the air-island and into the shrubbery, hoping to create enough confusion to break through. He heard shouts of consternation

but no cries of pain. The attackers' fire became ragged but it kept coming, and Madalitso felt the wind of an arrow's passage centimetres from his head.

A form leaped from the ground and lunged at him in the darkness, stabbing down with a knife. Madalitso twisted and took the knife thrust on his pack, pushing his enemy away with his arm and breaking for open floor. Then there was no one else in front of him, and he was through.

He looked to his side and saw that Nyuma, too, had gained the grassland. Ahead of them, looming in the darkness, was the tower's core. There might be shelter there. But the danger hadn't passed: behind them, the attackers were regrouping, and arrows flew at them as they fled. It seemed that the *tupondo* were leaping somehow from air-island to air-island, and there were others nearby where the two *bawela* might be pinned down. They turned, crouching low in the grasses, and fired back to protect their retreat.

But Nyuma turned at exactly the wrong time. An arrow sped at them from the air-island, and his pack wasn't in a position to stop it. It pierced his side, and he fell heavily, measuring his length on the ground.

Madalitso heard fierce cries from behind, and he looked on in horror. He fired twice at the voices and crouched by Nyuma, putting the older man's arm around his shoulder and supporting him as he rose. His breath was laboured from the thin air and Nyuma's weight and he stumbled as he made for an area where earth had piled over fallen girders to make a rampart.

He looked down as he ran, too exhausted to raise his head, and saw a line of nodules and tendrils running through the grass—a *wowa*, a fungus of some kind. To his surprise, one of the tendrils crackled blue, and it exuded a smell that was almost electric. He wondered what he might find if he assayed it, and then laughed out loud: he must truly be a *muwela* if he could think of such things even now.

He gained the rampart as a dart hissed overhead, and he felt a presence close behind. He fell against the earth and fired over the top. He dared to raise his head and saw four men charging. He fired again and one of them fell. Another crouched beside as Madalitso had done with Nyuma, tending to his comrade's injuries. Then, suddenly, there were thin lines of blue light along the grassland: many of them, enough to limn the attacking *tupondo* with an eerie glow. *The wowa*, Madalitso realised. And then the attackers were running away, taking their wounded with them.

Had they run in fear of the *wowa*, or had they simply decided that Madalitso and Nyuma had been evicted from their territory? Madalitso felt no relief as he cut a strip from his coat to bandage Nyuma. The older *muwela* was unresponsive and his breaths were shallow, and he seemed to be drifting in and out of consciousness. When Madalitso used tongs to pluck the arrowhead from his side, he saw the reason: it was smeared with an evil-smelling paste. *Poison*.

Madalitso looked to the curve of the tower's core, thirty meters away and rising far into the night. There was a door, and it looked overgrown but passable.

He would have to go there. He couldn't go down through the territory of the *tupondo* lest they attack again, and he remembered the stones that had been arranged around the bell and feared that they held many levels below this one. He would have to descend through the core. He might reach the lower forests safely, and if he did, he could light a signal fire. The guild would come to rescue them, and he could only hope Nyuma would last that long...

Fear held him back for a moment. The *bawela* never went into the core: there was no sunlight there, not even the diffuse light that reached the inner floors at odd times of day, and there was nothing to harvest. The stories said there were other things in there, things that no sane *muwela* would risk angering. But there was no other way, and it took only an instant for deed to take the place of thought.

He carried Nyuma on his shoulder again and rose to his feet, fearful that the *tupondo* might only have pretended to flee. But no arrows or darts interrupted the night, and the only sounds he heard as he gained the doorway were bird-calls and the rustle of small mammals. He swept the growth aside and, much to his relief, found that the door still opened. He blessed the Union to the ultimate generation and passed through.

He expected pitch darkness, but there was light. Not daylight, but electric light such as there was in the streets and homes of the city. He wondered briefly what the power source was—there was certainly no power elsewhere in the tower—but it hardly mattered.

Only one in ten of the lights still functioned, but they illuminated a vast chamber, a torus twenty meters wide that curved around an inner shaft. The walls rose a hundred meters in subtly curved grace to what had once been glass panels, and through their emptiness, Madalitso could see Mutanda's twin moons. And along the outer rim, there were glass chambers that held plants, or that had held them once.

Some of the plants were long dead, killed when the glass had broken and the atmosphere in the cases had been replaced by the cold, thin air outside. Others had thrived, overgrowing their chambers and spilling into the neighbouring ones or into the room itself. One of those, Madalitso could see, was the *wowa*. Its tendrils and nodules were everywhere, and they led to a massive growth about a third of the way around the torus. There was something else strange about the tendrils, and all at once Madalitso realised what it was: they had etched pathways in the steel. Some of the tendrils were sunk half a centimetre, and there were other paths exposed where the *wowa* had died back. It seemed almost that the fungus had used the metal for nourishment as it grew. There were acids that could do that even to Union steel, but Madalitso had never heard of a plant that could produce one.

He began making his way toward the centre of the *wowa*. He wasn't quite sure why he did, except for a wild hope that it or one of the other plants might prove to be an antidote for the arrow's poison. There were inscriptions under

the cases, he saw, and though they were in the ancient language of the Union, botanical terms had changed little enough that he could make them out. They named the plants, their properties, the dates collected, the worlds where they had been collected...

The worlds where they had been collected. It dawned on Madalitso that this had been a museum, an exhibit of the Union's curiosities. He stopped at one chamber that held a long-dead tree. *Diarrah's tent-tree, collected on Xai-Xai in the Year of Migration 29,827.*

"Two thousand years ago exactly," he murmured. There were dates below the other cases as well, starting in the twenty-sixth millennium; the latest of them read 30,228, when the war that brought down the Union must already have been raging. He looked to see if any of them might be proof against a respiratory poison, but none of the inscriptions mentioned that the plants within could strengthen breathing. In any event, most of them were long crumbled to dust.

He realised that he was nearing the centre of the *wowa*. The growth was too thick now for him to read the inscriptions, and even the occasional flashes of blue light seemed to come from deep within. Here, the fungus had overgrown much of the torus, blocking the way onward and extending even through the open passage that led to the inner core. Warm, damp air came from that passage, rising from the levels below, and where it mixed with the cold atmosphere of the outer world, that was where the *wowa* was thickest.

Through that doorway, Madalitso knew, was the way down. Time was running short: Nyuma was long past consciousness now, and his heartbeat was starting to become irregular. Madalitso would have to push his way through the *wowa* to get there, and the thought chilled him to the core of his being.

But he had no choice.

He took a breath for courage and went to the doorway, pulling the fungus aside to make a passage through.

As he touched the *wowa*, he saw the crackling light again, and he felt a shock at his fingertips. The shock travelled, and as it did, it seemed to turn into something like thought. And then, an overwhelming blast of mixed curiosity and fear.

For a second, Madalitso was sure he had been possessed by an *umupashi*, an ancestral spirit, but then he realised that the impulses must have come from the *wowa* itself. Such things were undreamed-of even in university libraries or the annals of the Union which had known many worlds and many races, and again Madalitso's first thought was that of a *muwela*: what a find *this* is! But there was no time for cataloguing or assaying, not now.

“I don’t mean any harm,” he said, his hands still on the masses of fungus. “I only want to pass. My fosterer is badly hurt, and I need to bring him down to the city to save his life. Please...”

There was no response from the *wowa*, and Madalitso cursed himself. Of course it hadn’t answered. Why would a *wowa* understand the language of Mutanda, or even the older one that had once been spoken throughout the Union? Why would it speak in words at all?

The scene before him seemed to blur as his mind raced. How could he ask a question without words? He fought down his panic and forced himself to think clearly. The blast of thought from the *wowa* had contained a powerful sense of curiosity, and he tried to shape the same pattern in his mind, along with an openness to knowledge, a willingness to share. He concentrated and held the thought, not daring to think beyond it, and waited.

There was nothing at first, but then... emotions overlaid with a sense of feeling, another that wasn’t quite taste, and the merest hint of other senses beyond Madalitso’s comprehension. There was a cold, sharp wind, the taste of an unknown rock, the warmth of a sun that was subtly different from Mutanda’s. There was confusion and a memory of death, of patches of fungus left sere and dry. There was air that tasted different, thick and uncomfortable, and stones that weren’t stones; there was a sense of loss, a struggle to understand. There was a growing consciousness, a resolution of scattered sensations into memory, and then a sudden heat—a fire! There was death, loss of memory, and finally decades and centuries in which thought returned...

Madalitso fought to keep from being overwhelmed. These were the *wowa*’s memories, but of what... and then, suddenly, he realised. “The *ichiyawafu*,” he whispered. The stories said that sailors dreamed of their dead ancestors when they journeyed between the stars, and it seemed that even a *wowa* did the same. And after that, the Union’s museum and the fires of war—fires that, Madalitso realised with a start, had swept over this tower sixteen hundred years ago.

It dawned on him, of a sudden, that his ancestors had committed a great crime. They’d thought that the *wowa* was a mere plant when in fact it was an *awantu*, a person of another creation. They’d taken it from its world against its will, at a time when it couldn’t think or understand, and brought it to a place that was not its home.

The tower was a *chitimbo*, he remembered, an ancestral burial place, and they were in the very soil. The ancestors who had committed this crime were long dead, but the *wowa* was alive and Madalitso was too—and now he dared to demand passage?

“I’m sorry,” he said, but knew even as he did so that it was useless. The fungus wouldn’t understand his words, and though he might convey his sorrow, it would never know what he was sorry *for*. He would have to compound the crime and push onward, and he began to move his hand from the *wowa* to the hilt of his machete.

But he never finished. He felt another electric shock and another blast of emotion: puzzlement, as if the *wowa* were losing control of its own thoughts. And then the sensation was replaced by billions all at once. The impulses reaching Madalitso's mind were no longer coherent or intelligent, no longer thoughts or even emotions. Instead, he was receiving temperatures, movements of air, the tastes of earth and atmosphere from a million million places.

The flood of sensation was almost enough to carry Madalitso's mind away with it, and he scrambled for sanity as the *wowa* had done when it was taken from its world centuries before. This was the demon of madness that the stories told of—but no, he told himself, it wasn't a demon, it was a living thing. And as he fought, he was able to focus on one feeling at a time: the taste of iron, the taste of chemicals in the soil outside the core, the tendrils far below where the air was so thick as to be poison, the overwhelming sense of consumption and absorption.

He breathed again—he hadn't realised he had stopped—and knew that each of the sensations came from a single one of the *wowa's* nodules. The fungus was a colony: each of its parts had no more intelligence than one cell of a human body, but together they could think and communicate. He understood more of the memories the *wowa* had sent to him earlier: why it had been so confused and half-conscious when it was taken from its home, and why it had become so again in the flames of the Union's fall. It had been too small then to have much capacity for thought; maybe it had gained such capacity only after its case was breached and it became free to spread throughout the upper stories. It must have happened very slowly, like a birth stretched over centuries.

Madalitso's focus became more precise as he regained control, and the sensations from the nodule he concentrated on became sharper. It was outside somewhere on the soil-covered floor, and now he could discern not one taste but several: each of the chemicals that made up the soil and the microbes that inhabited it. He could tell which had been brought by birds and which had decayed from the Union's furnishings, feel the traces of the worms that aerated them...

What a thing I have found, he thought again. The *wowa* could assay plant life and microbes more precisely than anything humans could make. If he could only learn to ask it, it could tell him precisely what biological treasures lay hidden in the tower.

That thought gave birth to another one, and to a wild hope: could the *wowa* tell where in Nyuma's blood the poison was? Could it leach the toxins out?

Before he knew he had done so, Madalitso laid Nyuma's body next to the fungus and pulled his coat and shirt up to expose the wound. He smelled the poison on the arrowhead, tried to imagine it as a taste, tried to send it to the *wowa* or the part of it that lay on Nyuma's skin. "This is something the *tupondo* make," he thought. "Maybe it's something you can use. I give you leave to take it. There are other things in Nyuma's blood too—there is iron—and you can have some of it as long as you leave him enough to live." It was hopeless, he knew—there was no way he could convert such a complex message into

emotion and sensation—but maybe the taste would be enough for the *wowa* to find what he wanted it to find.

He took the arrowhead and touched it to the same part of the *wowa* to strengthen the sensation. He was met by another blast of fear and a gathering of defences, but it was less intense than before. And from somewhere underneath, he felt a sense of absorption, and a taste that was quickly broken down but was unmistakably the poison.

“If you can save him, I’ll do anything,” he said. “What do you want? What does a *wowa* want? I’ll give it to you if I can.”

The words meant nothing to the *wowa*, but maybe the emotions behind them did, because what washed over Madalitso next was an onslaught of yearning and desire, mixed with the most concrete sensation the fungus had yet transmitted: millions of spores flying free, dancing on the wind.

Madalitso felt a sudden kinship to the *wowa*, fungus or not. What did any creature want but to make more of its own kind? Then he realised that it must already have done so. It had been centuries, at least, since it had grown outside the core to where the winds blew, and they must have carried its spores all that time. Most of them had no doubt descended to the lowlands where the thick air was poison, but surely some had made it to the high mountains. Maybe even now they were growing into consciousness; maybe someday the mountain people would learn that their realm was shared...

Even so, he had made a promise and he would keep it. He began to take a cutting of the fungus so he could scatter it in the mountains. But the *wowa* flashed blue, and a jet of liquid spurted from the area of the cut in the instant before Madalitso jerked away his hand, he smelled acid combined with the *kapondo*’s poison. *That* was clear enough. The fungus had already incorporated the poison into its arsenal, and if he were going to pay his debt, it would have to happen when he could explain to the *wowa* that he was doing so.

“If there is a debt,” he murmured, and he turned his eyes from the fungus to his fosterer. Nyuma was still unconscious, but his heartbeat was steady and his breathing was stronger, and it seemed he was beginning to stir.

When the older *muwela* opened his eyes, the sight that greeted them was Madalitso watering the *wowa* with his tears.



That night, the two climbers camped far down the core of the tower, at a landing of the endless stairwell that passed a thousand unknown rooms. The last, wispy tendrils of the *wowa* flashed blue along the wall, fighting for life in the air that was almost too thick for them.

“There has been an *awantu* in the tower all this time,” Nyuma said.

“Even before,” said Madalitso. “Even in the days of the Union.” He looked into the flames of their campfire. “It’s impossible, but...”

“Many impossible things have happened.”

“Yes,” Madalitso answered. “You are here, you are alive.”

They passed a long moment in companionable silence, and then Madalitso said, “I wonder if we’ll ever learn to talk to it.”

“Didn’t you already?”

“I’m... still not sure. And if I did, it was cries of fear, tastes—the things we might share with an animal. I can’t ask it to analyse a cutting for us, I can’t ask it about its gods or its history... I think the *wowa* becomes more intelligent as it grows, and maybe one that size has created philosophies beyond our imagining, but I don’t think we’ll ever be able to ask it what they are.”

“We’ll be lucky to learn how to ask it to help with the assaying,” Nyuma said. “And how would we pay it anyway? What do we have that it would want?”

Madalitso thought again of the *wowa*’s desire, the ecstasy of spores dancing in the wind, but said nothing. More of its kind were growing now on the mountainsides, and what would happen when they grew together? Would they fight, or find a language to talk to each other? Would they merge into something greater? What would they think of the people who lived among them?

“Maybe a machine that has the same senses the *wowa* has,” said Nyuma, “but then how would we communicate with it? I wonder if the best thing might be to go back up there with fire.”

“It has defences. And we owe it a debt for your life, and for our ancestors’ crime. We cut it away from its world, so now we share the high places of ours.”

The two of them sat in silence again, looking down into the stairwell toward the city that suddenly seemed a different place.

“*Shikulu*...” Madalitso began.

“*Mukulu*,” Nyuma answered. It was a single word, but it made Madalitso flush with pride: he was to address Nyuma as elder brother rather than grandfather, still a title of respect but one that was allowed only to apprentices who showed promise.

“Yes, *mukulu*.” Madalitso started to speak, then broke off and started again. “Is the *wowa* wondering the same things—whether it can ever talk to us, how much more than animals we are? What will it think of us when we return?” It seemed he was finished, but after a moment he said one thing more. “Does it have a name?”

For a long time, Nyuma had no answer, and the only sound was the crackling of fire. “*Malupili ishika*,” he said at last.

The mountains will know.

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